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**IRAN – SAUDI RIVALRY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON
GEOPOLITICS OF PERSIAN GULF**

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ABSTRACT:

There are diverse and critical reasons related to economic, social, geopolitical, security and strategic issues that cause a unique identity of Persian Gulf. In this research paper the key factors and relation among two giant powers of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both the countries have massive oil reserves but Saudi Arabia is availing leverage as Iran has to face restrictions from United Nations and United States of America to open sale of oil in market. This study will focus on rivalry amongst Iran and Saudi Arabia in Security, Ideology and Regional Dominance which are very crucial factors. The study will also find out possibility of settlement of matters among both the countries which is critical in setting long lasting peace and stable political, social and economic situation in Persian Gulf and Middle East.

INTRODUCTION:

Before the 1979 revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran were considered as pillars to ensure stability in Middle East region as there was close alliance with the United States, and were rivals and partners during the oil boom of the 1970s. However, with the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of official Shi'a Islamic governance in Iran, the relations transformed to political and religious rivalry that caused harm for whole middle east, Persian Gulf and overall Muslim world. The revolution in Iran was a source of inspiration for many Shi'a minority populations, as well as other Islamist groups under monarchies. Furthermore, official statements and unofficial rhetoric by the newly established Islamic Republic were a direct threat to Saudi Arabia's domestic fractions, its regional influence, and its legitimacy as the custodian of Harmain including Madina and Mecca. As Masry argues, "the *raison d'être* for such antagonism stems from Saudi fears of Iranian ideological attractions and political reach within the region, as well as within Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a populace."¹

Saudi Arabia was back bone in supporting Saddam Hussein during Iran and Iraq war tried to weaken the Islamic Republic and enhance its influence. Saudi Arabia provided financial as well as military assistance to Iraq. With the escalation of direct conflict as a result of the 1987 incident in the Great Mosque, Iran's strained relations with Saudi Arabia continued longer than those with the other GCC countries. Ayatollah Rafsanjani's reconciliation efforts paved the way for the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1991, which was followed by official visits from Ayatollah Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad to Saudi Arabia in the following years. In return, then Crown Prince Abdullah had visit of Iran in the December 1997 to take part in Islamic Cooperation Summit in Tehran. As a result of these, King Fahd shared opening remarks of Shura Council in July 1999, that strengthening bonds with Iran was in the favour of not only Arab states but in Persian Gulf too, and for Islamic worlds at broad spectrum.² At the same time Ayatollah Khamenei called for further cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and the two countries signed a security and anti-terrorism agreement in 2000.³ These interactions presented an era of close collaboration and a change from the more than a decade of conflict between the two countries. Conflict between Saudi and Iran is not new cases, if we view historically there are found many issues between both countries of Persian Gulf. On the other many neighbours worried about such conflict between them, because this conflict is creating tension and security risk for region. There is need to involve global and regional effort to solve the horrible conflict between them.

Even though the Hajj continues to be a factor in escalating direct bilateral tensions, evident by the Mena tragedy in 2015, there is a wide array of other political and regional issues that have not allowed the two countries to fully enhance bilateral relations. Iran and Saudi Arabia have opposing interests in Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, and both countries have adopted a competitive orientation that have shaped their policies towards the other. The negative goal attainments of both the countries have prolonged the regional and bilateral disputes. Iran's fundamental opposition to presence of U.S. military forces and

¹Sara Masry, "Changing the Lens: Contemporary Saudi-Iran Relations and Potential Benefits of Détente," in *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, ed. by Maaïke Warnaar et al. (London: Gerlach Press, 2016)

²Ibid

³Mona Eltahawy, "Khatami takes olive branch to Arab neighbors," *The Guardian*, May 16, 1999.

assistance to the Persian Gulf countries, and GCC countries reliance on the United States is one inherent point of dispute over the past four decades, which has largely influenced each country's bilateral and regional policies with respect to the other and the regional dynamics. Salem describes the competitive approach by both Saudi Arabia and Iran as a function of strategic vision:

Iran envisions a region banded together to resist 'imperial' domination, with itself as the preeminent power; it argues that its size, centrality, resources, Islamic renewal, defiance of outside powers, and technological advancement justify this position. Saudi Arabia envisions a much looser region in which U.S. power guarantees Gulf security, and Saudi Arabia counterpoises Iranian power, given its own energy resources and its central position within Islam as the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.⁴

The depiction by Salem of the goal attainments of both countries explains the rationale behind current conflicts, where both Saudi Arabia and Iran implemented the strategies to counter and contain the other. Moreover, the divergence of national and political interest and the rivalry for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the wider Muslim world has led to zero-sum politics and severe political, human, and economic costs. The aftermath of the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the storming of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran further fuelled the geopolitical divides between the two countries. At the same time, however, the Saudi monarchy appears to have no intention of escalating the conflict with Iran. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman shared his views in a discussion that "war with Iran is a big disaster that we won't allow to ignite," illustrating a desire to end the regional conflicts, and possibly more amiable relations with Iran.⁵

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Historical, analytical, descriptive, qualitative research methodology and techniques are adopted while conducting the research and in culmination of the up given title. Secondary sources of data collection are used for completion of this research paper which includes books and journals. Data was collected basically through secondary sources which include various publications made upon the issue of Iran-Saudi conflict and its implications on Persian Gulf. To all the extent biasness was given least importance in this study and unbiased description as well as analysis was made the central importance in our paper.

THE HAJJ DIMENSION:

The annual Hajj pilgrimage to Harmain including Medina and Mecca has been a source of tension between both the countries since 1920s, before official establishment of United Kingdom. Various issues have also emerged every year since the Iranian revolution.⁶ Following the official emergence of Imam Khomeini as the leader of the revolution in 1978, the Iranians and many Shi'a attending the annual Hajj pilgrimage engaged in demonstrations that at times led to scuffles with security forces. In the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, on July 31, 1987, a deadly quarrel occurred in the Great Mosque between the demonstrators and the Saudi security authorities who "employed deadly force to thwart the Iranian crowd."⁷ This clash resulted the death of more than

⁴ Salem, "Building Cooperation"

⁵ Interview with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, *The Economist*, January 6, 2016.

⁶ Martin Kramer, "Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca," in *The Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996)

⁷ Ibid.

four hundred pilgrims, mostly Iranian nationals, which resulted in the conflicts of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran the next day and the death of a Saudi diplomat. In a series of reciprocal actions, Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran in an attempt to restrict the Iranian pilgrims, which led as banning the Hajj for Iraninans in 1988.⁸

The tensed situation between above mentioned both countries continued in following decades, until the devastating earthquake in June 1990 in Iran, when Saudi Arabia sent humanitarian assistance to Rudbar and Manjil.⁹ President Rafsanjani took advantage of the opening by Saudi Arabia, and with the assistance of Omani mediation, Iran and Saudi Arabia managed to resolve the preliminary disputes. The foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a written agreement in Muscat in March 1991, resolving the disputes over the Hajj pilgrimage and resuming diplomatic ties, putting an end to twelve years of conflict.¹⁰ The resumption of friendly relations resulted in twenty-five years of somewhat peaceful Iranian pilgrimage as well as a *modus Vivendi* in the bilateral relations.¹¹

However, the Mena tragedy on September 24, 2015, occurred as a result of a stampede enroot to the annual Hajj pilgrimage, and led to 769 deaths according to Saudi reports, and 4,700 by Iranian estimates, and more than two thousand by an Associated Press computation.¹² In response, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that “the incompetence of the Saudis and their failure to provide security for the pilgrims in the house of God in reality showed that this government is not capable of managing the two holy mosques.”¹³ This harsh criticism led to Iran banning the Hajj in 2016. As one of the five pillars of Islam, forced upon every financially and physically capable Muslim, the exclusion of Iranian pilgrims sparked further public disapproval towards the Kingdom. To inhibit further escalation, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached an agreement in March 2017 for the return of Iranian pilgrims to the annual Hajj in the Summer of that year.¹⁴

THE RIVALRY FOR DOMINANCE:

The tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have wide-ranging and far-reaching reverberations in many regions. The geopolitical consortiums have had great influence on the escalation of regional conflicts. The various disputes between both the countries are not confined to the Persian Gulf but has spread throughout the entire Middle East and other Muslim countries. The allegiances, alliances and ethno-confessional ties have further broadened and complicated the conflict. Sectarian formulations of conflict are fuelled by political policies that are based on, as

⁸Ibid.

⁹Philip Shenon, “Iranian May See Quake as Opening to West,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 1990.

¹⁰Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), pp. 161-87.

¹¹Merriam-Webster defines *Modus Vivendi* as literally meaning “manner of living” in Latin, and it sometimes has that meaning in English as well. Usually, though, a *modus Vivendi* is a working arrangement that disputing parties can live with, at least until a more permanent solution can be found.

¹²“Saudi Arabia Hajj disaster death toll rises,” *Al Jazeera America*, October 19, 2015.

¹³Arash Karami, “Khomeini calls for international investigation into hajj stampede,” *Al Monitor*, September 7, 2016.

¹⁴Margherita Stancati, “Iranians to Participate in Hajj in Saudi Arabia After Ban,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2017.

Zubaida argues, “defensive regime strategies and sectarian entrepreneurs” using “the politics of identity in a globalized world.”¹⁵

The post-Saddam Iraq is one arena in which both Saudi Arabia and Iran have heavy investment for their national interests. From the Arab as well as other international perspectives, Iran was the primary benefactor of the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq, and as Khashoggi reiterated a statement by Saud Al Faisal who had stated the “U.S. presented the Iraq to Iran wrapped in a golden foil on the gold plate, and ‘opened apartheid of Iranians’ in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain.”¹⁶ Iran’s growing friendly relations with the Iraqi government and factions within the Iraqi society is counter to Saudi policies of containing the Islamic Republic’s influence.¹⁷

In a brief illustration of the adaption of a cooperative approach by both Iran and Saudi Arabia, both countries constructively collaborated to end the civil war in Lebanon in 2006, at least initially. However, during the 2008 Lebanese conflict, Iran supported Hezbollah, and the Kingdom supported the opposing Sunni led government of Siniora. The policies of the two countries were influential in the more than two years of political stalemate in Lebanon since 2014. As a compromise, Lebanon formed a government with a Saudi favoured prime minister and an Iranian favoured president. Nevertheless, Iran’s support of Hezbollah continues to be unacceptable by Saudi Arabia and its partners, and with intense Saudi lobbying efforts, the GCC and the Arab League designated the Lebanese Hezbollah as a terrorist organization for its support of the Syrian government in March 2016, resulting in the further tensions with the Islamic Republic.

Yemen and Syria, however, remain the two most important indirect theatres of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran’s moral, rhetorical, and material support of the Houthi’s in Yemen is the most serious cause of tensions for the Saudi leadership, due to the shared border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the Yemeni conflict, as described in more detail, has become a way to garner support within the GCC leaders and populations against the Islamic Republic by constantly using the media to blame Iran for the heavy financial, military, and human costs in Yemen and the prolongation of a supposedly swift military action. Additionally, the concurrence of the post-JCPOA era for Iran, as well as the war against Daesh in the Syria, have further complicated the interdependence of issues, where the settlement of one dispute can lead to broader agreements on other issues. However, relations are easily soured and diplomatic disputes seem to always lurk around the corner. The recent flare-up about the execution of Sheikh Nimr in January 2016, and the storming of diplomatic offices in Tehran and Mashhad, challenge the efforts to resolve the past and new disputes.

THE SECTARIAN FACTOR:

Presence of Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, and their historical inheritances of the Eastern Province remained been a constant challenge for the Al Saud family. In line with the patronage of loyal constituents, the unbalanced distribution of wealth and of development projects around the country has fuelled tensions among religious and ethnic minorities.¹⁸ Eastern Province of

¹⁵Zubaida, “Sectarian Dimensions”

¹⁶Panel Discussion. “Saudi-Iranian”

¹⁷“Arab League labels Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group,” Al Jazeera, March 12, 2016.

¹⁸Giacomo Luciano, “Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework,” in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

Saudi Arabia was largely excluded from development projects prior to the oil shocks of the late 1970s, until the Saudi leadership recognized that the unbalanced distribution of wealth could allow the rise of potential oppositionists.¹⁹ Even though new reforms were periodically introduced to reduce the tensions with the Shi'a minority, the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia do not have access to the same services provided to the rest of the country.²⁰

Saudi Arabia is a prime example of how first and second class citizens exist in rentier States.²¹ Co-ethnic and co-religionist Persian Gulf monarchs favour their co-sectarians over second class citizens, as arguably it is cheaper to buy their support than that of the other sect; "Why waste limited resources chasing citizens opposed to the status quo when they might be used to reward those who already have a material stake in its preservation,"²² Gengler asserts, illustrating a logical strategic path for the ruling families and elites that ensures their survival and a strengthened relationship with loyal constituents, while containing the minority. Moreover, the Shi'a in particular are largely viewed as Iran sympathizers, and as the execution of Sheikh Nimr illustrated, association with the Islamic Republic will not be tolerated by the Kingdom. Nevertheless, in the quest for stability and security in all of the provinces, Masry argues that Saudi Arabia "would benefit from addressing the deep-rooted sectarian, political, and socio-economic drivers of dissent among its Shi'a natives."²³ Such a proposition will also have positive reverberations in relationship among both the countries and will leave an impact on Iran's regional policies as well.

However, after the Mena tragedy during the Hajj in September 2015 and Saudi Arabia's termination of ties on January 3, 2016, a day after the execution of Sheikh Nimr and the attack on the Saudi Embassy, relations reached their worse levels in the history of the two countries. These events and the regional battles for influence have resulted in an unprecedented climate of hostility.²⁴ The Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel Al Jubair, has become one of the leading anti-Iran figures in the international community. He has countlessly accused and blamed the Islamic Republic of "igniting sectarianism," "supporting terrorism," and "interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries."²⁵ Basing his arguments on these three claims, Al Jubair's primary mission has become to denounce and blame Iran during conversation with world leaders. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia revamped its anti-Iran policies following the election of Donald Trump, whose policy towards Iran aligns more with that of Saudi leadership than did President Obama's.

An example of the new Saudi Arabian international efforts to counter Iran and further ignite tensions, on July 9, 2016, Prince Turki Al Faisal attended a conference hosted by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, a cult like dissident group that was labeled a terrorist organization by the United States until 2012, and continues to be despised by the overwhelming majority of

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciano, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

²²Justin Gengler, "Understanding Sectarianism in the Gulf," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. by Lawrence Potter, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

²³Masry, "Changing the Lens"

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Remarks by Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair at the Munich Security Conference. Munich, Germany. February 19, 2017

Iranians. During his remarks, Prince Turki extended his support for the organization that shook hands with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, and stated that the whole of the Muslim world stands to support their cause both in “heart and soul,” and praised its leader for “endeavor to rid your people of the Khomeinist cancer.”²⁶ One of the harshest comments by any GCC official, the remarks by Prince Turki, in wake of the growing tensions in 2016, presents a revamped effort by Saudi Arabia to destabilize the Iranian even push for regime change policies that were set aside by the United States since 2013.

FUTURE PROSPECTS:

While the tensions between both the countries are at an unprecedentedly high level, as the two most influential nations in the Persian Gulf are responsible for ensuring peace and stability in the region. As Khaled Al Maena contends, “I believe the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is beneficial for the whole world. Iran is among founding members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Iran is a neighbour, Iran is a Muslim country, and if Iran and Saudi Arabia get rid of this tension and anxiety it can go a long way in resolving other regional disputes.”²⁷ The commonalities between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while less than most other Iran-GCC relations, have the capacity to trump the hostilities, and moving away from a zero-sum approach will undoubtedly benefit not only the two countries, but also the entire Middle East and beyond.

Despite the overtures by President Rouhani, Saudi Arabia, especially since the ascension of King Salman, has maintained a hard-line approach.²⁸ This approach, however, runs counter to the interests of the region as well as further diminishes chances for rapprochement. As Al Maena also argues, “the hard positions by certain Arab countries and some GCC countries does not help.”²⁹ In response to a question regarding Saudi Arabia’s discontinuation of diplomatic and economic ties with Iran, Khaled Al Maena stated: “I believe the termination of ties is an impediment, and it is important to have some kind of relationship.”³⁰ To overcome the post-2016 impasse, both the countries must arrive at a mutual considerate that continuation of the competitive approach has led to a zero-sum outcome. Or as Ambassador Mousavian asserts, “to alleviate the tensions between them, Iran and Saudi Arabia need to recognize they both have legitimate security interests in the region and not to approach the other in a zero-sum way.”³¹

Both countries can shift their focus from the negative interdependency and increasing tensions, to a more amicable relationship and take advantage of the multiple areas of economic cooperation. For example, the annual Hajj pilgrimage, in which more than one hundred thousand Iranians participate, and the Umra pilgrimages, in which another five hundred thousand Iranian pilgrims travel to Saudi Arabia, provide the Saudi government as well as people with around three billion dollars in profits every year.³² As Khashoggi expounds, “in principle we should have a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is good for everyone, ... I am from Medina,

²⁶“Prince Turki Al Faisal, at the Paris Rally to Free Iran: The Muslim World Supports You both in Heart and Soul,” Asharq Al Awsat, July 9, 2016.

²⁷Al Maena, “Interview”

²⁸Mousavian, “Interview”

²⁹Khaled Al Maena, Interview by Mehran Haghirian, March 10, 2017

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Mousavian, “Interview”

³²Katie Sola, “Breaking with Iran Could Cost Saudi Arabia Billions in Revenues from Pilgrims,” Forbes, January 5, 2016.

we like the Iranians, their pilgrims, they are good spenders, but we do not like the politics of their government.”³³ The distinction by the Saudi Arabians between the Iranian people and the government is important, and at the same times allows for the future resumption of economic and other people-to-people exchanges. Another investment area to explore is natural gas which can be “easily piped to the kingdom.”³⁴ As relatively low cost investment, the pipeline can secure the gas needs of Saudi Arabia as well as ensure a strengthened bilateral relationship.

CONCLUSION:

While the war and dispute conditions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are at an unprecedentedly high level, the two countries, as the two most influential countries in the Persian Gulf, are responsible for ensuring stable conditions in their region. This conflict is definitely not in the favor for both of them. This issue is not only creating panic between region, damaging economy and relations among both countries. Due to this situation Middle East suffer and their external relations are not stable in this region.

In Saudi Arabia, presence of Shi’a community and the historical inheritances of the Eastern Province have been a constant challenge for the Al Saud family. In line with the patronage of loyal constituents, the unbalanced distribution of wealth and of development projects around the country has fuelled tensions among religious and ethnic minorities.

The flagging of the Iraq subsequent the two damaging Gulf wars and minor disputes converted the Persian Gulf in and unstable tri polar power conformation into a bipolar structure in 2000 while Iran and Saudi Arabia were influential and central powers.

This situation again refreshed lasting conflicts between both the countries relating to the early history of Islam religion. Saudi Arabia tried to lead Islamic countries while Iran has its fellowship and wanted democracy in Islamic States. In Saudi Arabia, presence of Shi’a communities and the historical legacies of the Eastern Province have been a constant challenge for the Al Saud family. In line with the patronage of loyal constituents, the unbalanced distribution of wealth and of development projects around the country has fueled tensions among religious and ethnic minorities. Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia was largely excluded from development projects prior to the oil shocks of the late 1970s, until the Saudi leadership recognized that the unbalanced distribution of wealth could allow the rise of potential oppositionists.

Even though new reforms were periodically introduced to reduce the tensions with the Shi’a minority, the Shi’a in Saudi Arabia don’t have access to the same services provided to the rest of the country. The ending of diplomatic relations between capital cities of Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2016 due to the attacks.

USA is a super power and its relations with Saudi Arabia is better than other Persian Gulf countries especially Iran. On the other hand, external relations between USA and Iran are not stabled due atomic sanction on Iran by USA. Meanwhile USA has interests in Persian Gulf to cover China geographically as well oil reserves in Persian Gulf.

³³Panel Discussion. “Saudi-Iranian”

³⁴Seznec, “Pot of Gold”

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